

Bad news is old news for education

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Senator Jan Angel 26th District Republican

— *image credit: courtesy photo*

Bad news is old news for education — good news is here

Opinion: Sen. Jan Angel 26th Legislative District

You might have seen negative news reports about Washington's education system — the need for funding, classrooms, technology and accountability. You've possibly even heard about the 77-percent graduation rate, or the teacher walk-outs and strikes in protest against the Legislature.

That is all old news. What you may not be hearing about is what's in store for education in Washington. What you should know is that the biggest advances in education in 30 years are currently on the horizon in Olympia.

In 2013, 89 percent of legislators agreed on a budget that turned the past 30 years of neglecting education on its head. Past decades had seen new state spending go to non-education at a rate of \$2 for every \$1 to education. The 2013-15 biennial state budget more than reversed that trend, setting new state spending at a rate of \$3 to every \$1 for non-education. That totaled \$1 billion in new money for schools.

The state Supreme Court warned that wasn't enough, but everyone — Legislature, governor, courts — was already in agreement. Even better news is on its way.

This year's budget is guaranteed to represent an even bigger investment in education than we made in 2013. There is broad bipartisan agreement that more than \$1.3 billion will be added to K-12 funding this year, an increase of more than 18 percent. Over two years, this adds up to an increase of \$2.7 billion. Once again, support for education will increase at a rate of two- or three-to-one over non-education. For the first time in 30 years, education will return to a 47-percent share of the budget. This is a tectonic shift in the state's priorities. What does all this new money mean for the quality of our schools? Each of those dollars is targeted to invest in what actually gets results for kids, starting with fully funding schools' maintenance, supplies and operating costs, then making improvements where students need it most.

To start with, \$350 million will go to reducing class sizes in K-3. Research shows that reduced class sizes in these grades pays off throughout the student's education and beyond. Another \$188 million will go to expanding all-day kindergarten across the state based on data that shows students succeed more when we start their education earlier and with more support. Both of these investments give first priority to low-income and minority school districts where schools have been failing and students are in the most need.

These are in addition to investments in teacher-pay raises, computer-science education, turning around persistently failing schools, and many other areas of immediate need. This is incredible news for Washington schools. But wait, there's more. The Legislature is also leading on a breakthrough in early-learning and higher-education investments. Research shows early learning pays off in a big way throughout a student's life. As a result, the new budget is shaping up to increase support for early learning by close to 100 percent, coupled with new bipartisan legislation to require higher-quality early care for children. The good news for higher education is, at minimum, a tuition freeze and hopefully in this budget, a reduction. In 2013-15, our Senate majority led the Legislature to freeze tuition for two consecutive years, something not achieved in more than 30 years. This year, the House of Representatives has proposed to continue the freeze. In the Senate, we propose to actually reduce college tuition and tie it to average state wages moving forward. This would be the first tuition reduction in state history and the only tuition-reduction plan in the country. When you read the bad news, see rallies and hear the emotionally charged claims, I hope you will see that these are mostly about political positioning around labor-union issues. The real news about education in Washington is overwhelmingly good. And there is a greater emphasis on doing the right thing for kids than there has been in decades. This is a historic time for Washington children and their education.